

Voters tapped as Ohio opioid crisis stretches foster care

November 6 2017, by Andrew Welsh-Huggins

Ohio's opioid crisis is stretching the state's foster care system as more and more children are removed from the homes of their drug-addicted parents, leading to ballot requests Tuesday for more funding.

Not only do more [children](#) require foster care, they increasingly have [mental health problems](#) because of trauma they've experienced living in chaotic, drug-filled households, children [service](#) leaders say.

Kids also are staying in foster care longer because it takes additional time for opioid users to kick the habit. Making things worse, it's grown harder to find extended family members to take children in because so many adults are addicted.

After a young mom in Licking County in central Ohio recently tested positive for opioids, officials turned to her mother as a child care option. But she also tested positive.

"We are actually, believe it or not, in the third and fourth-generation of family involvement," said Kim Wilhelm, protective services administrator for Licking County Job & Family Services.

On Tuesday, the agency is asking voters to approve \$3.9 million in additional annual funding, on top of the same amount the department already receives. It's the first request for new money in more than three decades, said agency director John Fisher.

The money will not create a surplus, but will help reduce deficits the agency has been running because of increased foster care expenses, he said.

"These children did not ask for this," Fisher said. "These children are truly the innocent victims of an environment in which they've had no control and no input."

Crawford, Fairfield, Lake and Vinton counties also are asking for either new levies or to renew current levies with extra money. Six other counties on the ballot too, some of them going to voters a year earlier than expected because of the [opioid](#) crisis.

About 15,000 Ohio children are in foster care, up from about 12,300 in 2010, with no signs of the upward trend abating, according to the Public Children Services Association of Ohio. One in every two children in Ohio foster care has a parent who uses drugs.

Other states hit hard by opioids report similar trends. Kentucky has about 8,600 children in out-of-home care, including [foster care](#), a number that has risen in recent years and appears to be attributable to the drug epidemic, according to Kentucky Youth Advocates, a children's advocacy group.

In New Hampshire, child removal numbers jumped from 312 in 2014 to 547 last year, with nearly two in every three cases in 2016 involving parental drug or substance abuse, according to the state's Health and Human Services Department.

In Ohio, Licking County foster mom Kim Prince has taken in countless foster children over 30 years, including four she adopted. She worries what would happen to children without a safe place to stay, whether for a day or months at a stretch.

"Where are they going to go if they don't have foster homes? Everybody has to be somewhere," she said.

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